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THE LIFE AND WORK OF DR. LEWIS A. STIMSON

By James Ewing

An address delivered on the occasion of Mrs. Dora Wheeler Keith's presentation to Cornell University of her portrait of Dr. Stimson, in Stimson Hall, January 9, 1922.

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The Life and Work of Dr. Lewis A. Stimson

IN this splendid building, erected and equipped for medical education and research, we have today the grateful privilege of installing a portrait of the late Dr. Lewis A. Stimson.

The generous donor of this edifice and the esteemed patron of Cornell, Dean Sage, appropriately named the building Stimson Hall, so that we are now in a way confirming the dedication of the structure to the memory of the man who was mainly responsible for the founding of the Medical College of Cornell University.

A portrait painted by one who knew and loved its subject well need not be a perfect likeness. It must be more. It must be an interpretation of the man it portrays, a reflection of his personality as conceived by the artist. It will vividly recall to each of us who enjoyed his friendship the great personal debt which we owe to his inspiring influence as man, as physician, and as educator. Hence this painting, the work and the gift of Mrs. Boudinot Keith, is a welcome and appropriate addition to this building. It cannot fail to diffuse through these halls the influence of a strong personality, and thus to commemorate as nothing else could do the life and services of a great physician to whose honor this edifice shall stand as the years roll on.

In accepting this portrait we cannot do less than to consider what manner of man it represents, and to recall some of the services which he rendered to Cornell University, to medicine, and to humanity. In doing so we shall also serve ourselves, being reminded of the high standards of labor and duty which our forbears maintained, and to which we also, to be worthy successors, must adhere.

As we look upon this portrait somewhat different feelings will arise with each of us. To me the artist seems to have softened the rugged facial lines of the man in action, and to have most fortunately suggested the intellectuality, the spirituality, and the refinement of the man at heart. All will recall the untiring energy, the vigor of thought and speech, the sound judgment, and the broad sympathy which characterized Dr. Stimson. Whatever he did was always done with frankness and decision. His opinions while judicial were always

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stated without equivocation. His actions and policies, while carefully considered, were always carried out firmly and consistently.

He was a firm friend and great admirer of the late Dr. Alfred L. Loomis, one of the most remarkable men New York medicine has ever produced, and at a memorial meeting held at the Academy of Medicine he thus described Dr. Loomis:

“While he may have had but little of that quality which was esteemed among the highest virtues by the old moralists, the passionless wisdom of the philosophical Greek, the *temperantia* of Cicero, the moderation of St. Paul, he was wholly free from that other which so often masquerades in its form, which hides mental and moral irresolution under the cloak of deliberation, the quality which, when unbalanced by strong practicality and resolute will, keeps a man so alive to the force of what may be said in favor of the other side, that a clean cut strongly held decision becomes an impossibility for him, and which finally lands him as a leader in the quagmire of impotent compromise. Of that quality he had nothing. His convictions were clear and strongly held, and when the time came he never hesitated to express them uncompromisingly, and never flinched from word or act that seemed required by them.”

This striking analysis exactly applies to Dr. Stimson.

Elihu Root truly said of him that he was primarily a man of action rather than of deliberation. Yet Dr. Stimson's truly remarkable powers of observation and his logical thought enabled him to grasp the salient points of a complex matter and reach a decision far more quickly than did most of his associates. As he never rambled in speech, so he never wandered in the finality of his logic. He seldom indulged in humor and never in sentimentality. Like a deep stream his feelings ran smoothly. He was pervaded with an air of grave earnestness, the secret of which is reserved to those who know the vicissitudes of his early professional life. These mental characteristics, undoubtedly inherited, must have been highly trained in his scientific education, and they were certainly taxed to the uttermost by the innumerable critical decisions he was called upon to make during forty years of active surgical practice. For him life was always very real and earnest. Being rigidly honest with himself and a keen self-critic, he had little patience with the dull mind, the opportunist, or the self-deceiver. Since these failings are rather com-

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mon human frailties, he was a sharp critic of some of his professional contemporaries, who feared but could not fail to respect his judgments. There were few situations in which his superior information and mental equipment failed to distinguish him as a leader. His circle of truly admired friends was necessarily small. He once admitted to me that a man could have few friends if he insisted on them being flawless.

On the other hand no New York physician had so many followers dependent upon a leader for both opportunity and advancement. He delighted in picking out young men and urging them on in the lines of sound activity and progress, and once having committed himself to the task he never abandoned his charges. I consider this personal loyalty to his chosen associates the most splendid feature of this great man's character. What a powerful influence was exerted by his sense of personal loyalty and his strong trust in human nature is well illustrated by the fact that in two instances of which I personally know, his endorsement of young physicians who had fallen into supposedly incurable habits resulted in their reformation and in their ultimately achieving high distinction in their profession. This helpfulness spread itself out further in a genuine concern for the comfort and welfare of all the young doctors who served on his numerous staffs, scores of whom carry with them grateful remembrances of his kind regard.

Dr. Stimson was the most successful diviner and assiduous respecter of other people's feelings that I have ever known. He exercised these talents in conference with his colleagues over important matters of policy, and he carried them to the bedside of his patients. I have seen him most particular to reassure an alarmed patient who had overheard an incautious remark by some physician which suggested a grave turn in the patient's malady. He was thus a man of deep and discriminating sympathy. With these mental and moral powers thoroughly trained in critical methods, enjoying abundant leisure, and free from all secondary ambitions, he represented the ideal scientific physician.

One of the last but most notable expressions of his sympathies was his deep concern regarding the issues and outcome of the great War. Here he showed his lifelong interest for the French people, among whom his scientific education was begun, by collecting im-

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portant medical supplies and funds, twice going to France, and, probably at serious expense to his health, distributing them with discriminating care among French soldiers. Being a member of the Société de Chirurgie de Paris, he was cordially received by the French authorities, and he engaged in studies of war fractures with the French military surgeons.

No side of Dr. Stimson's character was more noteworthy than his sportsmanship, into which he carried the same vigorous spirit and expert skill that he exhibited in his work. The cruises of the little *Fleur de Lys*, competing in transatlantic races, and buffeting wind and wave on even terms with racing ships of large tonnage, are truly famous incidents of American seamanship. The spirit of the amateur was wholly lacking in these remarkable adventures. They were his response to the great call of the wild. Thus he plunged his master mind and his strong soul, unreservedly but under full control, into both work and play.

With these powers of mind and heart, directed with untiring energy, what did he accomplish in medicine? I think it may be said that as a writer and clinical investigator Dr. Stimson was one of the very few American surgeons whose work measures up to the strictest scientific standards. He appears never to have written without having something original to say, while the number and scope of his writings established a record which has seldom been equalled. The uniformly high character of his writings was well foreshadowed by his first contribution in 1875, the Woods Prize Essay on *Bacteria and their Influence on the Development of the Septic Complications of Wounds*. He was a pioneer in this country in the application of bacterial antisepsis in surgery. In 1878 he translated from the French Léon Gosselin's *Clinical Lectures on Surgery*. In the same year appeared the *Manual of Operative Surgery*, which maintained itself as a standard work through four editions. In 1883 he published Van Beuren's *Lectures on the Principles of Surgery*. In 1883 also he presented the first edition of the *Treatise on Fractures*, followed in 1885 by a similar *Treatise on Dislocations*. These two volumes were later combined and successively enlarged through eight editions, forming eventually his crowning scientific achievement. This work has always been and will long remain the classic treatise on these subjects. In it are revealed a comprehensive

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knowledge of the world's literature in this field and a vast amount of careful original research based on his own extensive experience. In 1895-7 he edited the translations of Tillman's *Principles of Surgery and Surgical Pathology*, and Tillman's *Text Book of Surgery*. Meanwhile he found time to write authoritative monographs; on *Aneurysm*, for Dennis's System of Surgery, and for the Reference Handbook of the Medical Sciences; on *Surgical Diseases of the Kidney*, for Appleton's System; and on *Injuries to the Back* for Ashurst's System. He was thus most generous in his support of the literary ambitions of his colleagues. He frequently responded to calls for public addresses, which he always prepared with great care and which contained original points of view of permanent value. He was a great student and admirer of Pasteur, and in 1893 he wrote a most admirable interpretation of Pasteur's life and work.

In addition to his more comprehensive writings, we find to his credit no less than one hundred and twenty formal contributions on current medical observations and problems. The review of Dr. Stimson's literary labors must excite the greatest admiration and even amazement, that in the midst of active daily practice his un-failing energy could enable him to accomplish so much.

Dr. Stimson's genius for medical organization was for many years one of the main forces that advanced the standards of medical practice in New York City. For three decades he was the most progressive and influential personality among a group of able colleagues at New York Hospital. In the Hudson Street branch of the New York Hospital he developed a remarkably efficient and indispensable service in acute traumatic diseases, and here he secured much of the experience with gunshot injuries, fractures, and dislocations, which made him a leading authority in these fields. Some conception of the scope of the service that he built up and conducted at Hudson Street Hospital can be gained from the fact that between the years 1894 and 1905 there were recorded at this institution no less than 14,566 fractures.

From the beginning of his medical career to the time of his death Dr. Stimson was an earnest and efficient teacher of medicine. In 1880 he was Professor of Pathological Anatomy in New York University Medical School, and in 1884 he became Professor of Clinical

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Surgery. During the last twenty years of his career he was Professor of Surgery in Cornell, thus completing nearly forty years in medical instruction.

It was his high appreciation of scientific standards and of the urgent need of improvement in medical education that led him to effective action in the founding of Cornell Medical School. This, his greatest service to medicine, he was able to accomplish through the generous support and farsighted vision of his lifelong friend, Colonel Oliver H. Payne. There is little doubt that Colonel Payne depended on Dr. Stimson for much of his medical information, and there is also no doubt that this information was so clearly presented that Colonel Payne was in full command of the medical situation and of medical needs when, in 1899, he founded our Medical School in New York and secured for it connection with Cornell University. Medical progress in an educational institution under university auspices was the idea these men had in mind. I have been repeatedly assured that their main objective was medical research, which they correctly divined could best be developed in a teaching institution under university control. They fully understood the significance of the university spirit, and its essential importance in medical education, and by long experience they had acquired a lively distrust of the capacity of practising physicians immersed in hospital and private practice to conduct a successful medical school without university affiliation. It is perhaps well that these aims of our founders should be recalled and emphasized from time to time, lest they be forgotten among the conflicting currents of medical fads and fashions.

How well these ideals were realized the history of Cornell Medical School during its first twenty years may show. Under the guidance of Stimson, Polk, and Schurman, the Cornell School promptly took its place in the front rank of American medical schools, and in many respects it became a recognized leader.

In this achievement Dr. Stimson's wide experience, his clear vision, and his personal devotion were very important, if not the prime factors. His address at the opening of the School in 1900 showed that he was fully acquainted with all the demands of modern medical education. At the dedication of Stimson Hall in 1903, in an address entitled "Teaching and Research: Distinct and In-

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dispensable Functions of a University," he traced with great discernment the conditions under which successful teaching and genuine research can be conducted. He concerned himself with the development of all the departments of the school and he was particularly devoted to the interests of the laboratory departments. For many years he made frequent visits to the laboratories, showing a keen and intelligent interest in all the work going on, offering advice and assistance, extending his congratulations on the progress of research, and establishing personal friendship with the laboratory workers. It is clear that this personal support of Dr. Stimson was a powerful and even an essential influence in maintaining a fine spirit of cooperation in the school, and I believe it was one of the main sources of its success. There are so many other conspicuous instances where the success of medical institutions has been dependent on the personality of great men that the question may well be raised whether great medical organizations can ever be truly successful without the presence of such strong guiding spirits.

Cornell acknowledges a great debt to this remarkable man, to whose energy, spirit, and devotion our medical school owes its existence, its assured stability, and above all its fine traditions. There are doubtless many portraits of famous contributors to human knowledge, worthy supporters of human needs, hanging in the halls of the great buildings grouped on this beautiful hillside, commemorating the lives and labors of great men. These are the influences that make the university spirit. No one can live among them without a sense of their inspiring influence. Among them all there is none more significant nor more worthily received than the one we add to Stimson Hall today.

